

“The Additional Attraction of Affliction”: Disability, Sex, and Genre Trouble in Barchester Towers

By Clare Walker Gore

WHILE THERE IS NEVER any serious doubt that Mr. Arabin, clergyman hero of Anthony Trollope’s Barchester Towers (1857), is destined to marry our heroine, Eleanor Bold, there are moments in the novel when he is all but overcome by the charms of Signora Madeline Neroni, most beautiful and most amoral member of the rackety Stanhope family. Having spent her wicked youth in Italy, where her father has been taking an extended leave of absence from his clerical duties – curtailed only by a peremptory summons from the new Bishop – Madeline is entertaining herself during her enforced stay in Barchester by waging a concerted campaign of seduction, intending “to have parsons at her feet” (86–87; vol. 1, ch. 10). The fact that she never leaves her sofa does nothing to impede her success in this regard: although Madeline is described by the narrator as “a helpless, hopeless cripple” (270; vol. 1, ch. 27), every man she meets is shown to fall under her spell. In fact, when Arabin finds himself “mak[ing] comparisons between her and Eleanor Bold, not always in favour of the latter,” he reflects that Madeline is “the more lovely woman of the two, and had also the additional attraction of her affliction; for to him it was an attraction” (74; vol. 2, ch. 34). Far from diminishing her “loveliness,” Madeline’s disability actually heightens her sexual appeal for Arabin.

Twentieth-century critics have found this hard to account for. The association between disability and sexlessness, which perhaps reached its height in the post-war period, led Christopher Herbert to claim that Madeline’s “compulsive seduction of men clearly is a pathological compensation for the absence of all hope of erotic pleasure” (170), while P. D. Edwards calls her a “sexually incapacitated siren” whose success in captivating men is neither “credible” nor “realistic” (26). Despite Trollope’s specificity about the nature and

extent of Madeline's physical impairments – which consist of a serious injury to one of her knees (75; vol. 1, ch. 9) – these critics do not hesitate to elide her disability with a total inability to have sex or attract admirers. As George Levine has pointed out in relation to Trollope, literary realism depends for its effects less upon fidelity to social reality than to “certain conventions of the credible” (6); by the time Edwards was writing about Barchester Towers, it seems that these conventions did not include the possibility that disabled women might be sexually attractive. In 1857, however, it is clear that they did. Trollope appears to have been confident that his readers would understand why “affliction” would constitute “an additional attraction” for Arabin, and accept it as plausible both that Madeline deliberately turns the conversation to the subject of her “affliction” every time she encounters a potential admirer – and that this proves to be a fail-safe strategy (74; vol. 2, ch. 34).

For the twenty-first century critic, Madeline's success in managing her disabled identity in such a way that it enhances rather than diminishes her sexual appeal for men, and thereby furthers her schemes to wield power in Barchester society, is replete with positive political implications. Her self-assertiveness and celebrated charm fly in the face of both nineteenth-century and (perhaps more importantly) modern stereotypes about disabled people's supposed passivity and victimhood. As Julia Miele Rodas has pointed out, the “delight of Madeline's character is exactly this: That she is not ‘overcoming’ her disability (a conventional interpretation of the disabled figure), but rather, that she uses her disability to advantage” (372). As Rodas goes on to suggest, the source of Madeline's power is that rather than embodying certain stereotypes of disability, she plays on them, performing “affliction” in such a way as to expose the socially constructed nature of disabled identity.¹ Through this performance, Madeline could be seen to introduce what Robert McRuer calls “ability trouble,” the correlative to Judith Butler's concept of gender trouble, into Barchester Towers (McRuer 10). Building on Butler's argument that the gender binary can be queered through

performances which disrupt the naturalised connection between sex and gender (Butler 175), McRuer argues that the dis/ability binary can be “cripped” from a “critically disabled” position, which refuses “compulsory able-bodiedness” just as Butler’s “critically queer” stance disrupts compulsive heterosexuality (McRuer 2, 30). We might read Madeline as a “critically disabled” character in McRuer’s sense: a social rebel who “crips” the ability/disability binary, both by self-consciously performing rather than embodying her disabled identity, and by disrupting the cultural narrative which asserts that ability is necessarily preferable and superior to disability.

Tempting and enjoyable as such a reading might be, and as useful as it is in explaining contemporary critics’ appreciation of Madeline’s character, it tells us very little about how nineteenth-century readers would have understood her performance.

Reconstructing the expectations that readers in 1857 would have brought to the representation of a disabled character like Madeline not only enables us to identify more precisely the radical or subversive elements of her characterisation for her original audience, but also to recognise the generic connotations of the stereotypes upon which she draws, and therefore to read more accurately the signals Trollope was sending his readers about the kind of novel they were reading.

As my title suggests, I will be drawing on Butler’s model of gender trouble to argue that Madeline introduces not (or not only) ability trouble into Barchester Towers, but genre trouble. By creating a disabled character who plays on and with the figure of the idealised invalid, Trollope troubles the novel’s generic allegiance, parodying the feminine domestic realist fiction from which the figure of the angelic invalid is drawn, aligning himself with a masculine tradition of satire even as he participates in the tradition he subverts. The sexual magnetism of the idealised disabled figure I will be calling the “angel on the couch” is latent in the domestic fiction in which she typically appears and with which she is most strongly

associated: here, it is wickedly exploited by a disabled woman who adopts a kind of disability drag in her performance – rather than her personification – of invalidism.

As Maria Frawley points out in her monograph on the subject, in the wider culture “invalidism” did not describe any one medical condition, but was broadly associated with the experiences of long-term or incurable illness and immobility, the basic expectation being that invalids were recumbent (3, 5). In domestic fiction, the twin experiences of passivity and immobility were consistently connected to a particular, and a particularly feminine, plot role. By the time Trollope published Barchester Towers in 1857, there was a strong connection between popular domestic realism, associated with women writers, and the representation of female invalids as exemplary figures. As one critic for the Saturday Review put it in 1866, the “angelic being with a weak spine, who, from her sofa, directed with mild wisdom the affairs of the family or the parish, was a favourite creation of our lady-novelists of the pre-Braddonian period” (“Novels, Past and Present” 438–39). The role of the female invalid in novels of this “pre-Braddonian” (anti-sensational, domestic) kind came with a very particular set of expectations. Confined to a couch, through her experience of immobility and pain the angelic invalid overcomes her faults of character and becomes patient, wise, and kindly, counselling other characters and providing them with a source of spiritual inspiration. Her own exclusion from the marriage plot – based on her identity as an invalid and therefore unsullied by the imputation of unattractiveness which it carried in the case of other spinsters – frees her to observe and advise upon the marriage plots of others.

This role seems to have emerged gradually in domestic realist novels of the first half of the nineteenth century.² In Jane Austen’s Persuasion (1817), the invalid Mrs. Smith is not without foibles, but Anne Elliot is inspired by her patience and cheerfulness in the face of suffering, qualities which Mrs. Smith herself suggests have been nurtured by her experience of disability, crediting “sickness and sorrow” with having developed her moral seriousness

and enabled her to shake off the flightiness of her youth (167, 218). As well as inadvertently inspiring Anne, Mrs. Smith plays a vital role in Anne's marriage plot, revealing the wickedness of Mr. Elliot's character and thereby smoothing the way for her marriage with Captain Wentworth.

In Harriet Martineau's Deerbrook (1838), the disabled governess Maria Young represents a development of Mrs. Smith's role. She is similarly impoverished and disabled, but is more fully consigned (and resigned) to the role of observer. It is her own exclusion from the marriage plot which enables her to devote her energies to observing what is going on around her and to facilitating the marriage plots of others. As she puts it, she is "out of the game" and therefore "put into a post of observation on others . . . it is my proper business to keep an intent eye upon the possible events of other people's lives" ("Deerbrook" 35). Maria holds herself to this definition of her duty, even when the marriage plot she has to observe and promote is between her own former lover and her best friend. In a novel which repeatedly stresses the need for morally virtuous subjects to give up their own desires, Maria acts as a kind of exemplar: the most selfless and the least celebrated heroine of all.

Disabled women continue to play this role in domestic realist novels throughout the 1840s and 1850s. The archetypal saintly invalid is perhaps Charlotte Yonge's Margaret May, eldest sister of the May family in The Daisy Chain (1856).³ Permanently injured in the carriage accident which kills her mother at the beginning of the novel, Margaret becomes ever more selfless and spiritually-minded as the novel progresses, dispensing wisdom from her sofa, especially to her harum-scarum younger sister, Ethel, who is inspired by Margaret's example.⁴ Harriet Martineau's claim in Life In the Sick-Room (1844) that those who suffer immobility and pain "see the whole system of human life rising and rising into a higher region and a purer light" (41) is reflected in Yonge's depiction of Margaret, whose piety, detachment, and moral perfection increase in line with the severity of her physical suffering

and the degree of her immobility. As her health sinks into terminal decline, her spiritual condition becomes elevated to the point that she is “living, assuredly, in no ordinary sphere of human life,” although she is “never otherwise than cheerful” (The Daisy Chain 623).

It comes as no surprise, then, that Margaret’s marriage plot is sublimated into a purely spiritual union with her lover, Alan Ernescliffe. The general consensus that a physically disabled woman should not marry was rarely challenged, although plot-lines were sometimes devised which enable such marriages to take place, as in Yonge’s later novel, The Clever Woman of the Family (1865), in which the saintly invalid Ermine Williams marries her faithful lover Colin Keith.⁵ As Martha Stoddard Holmes has convincingly argued, however, these married invalids do not sever the connection between sexlessness and disability, because “the physically disabled women who achieve [marriage and motherhood] are marked by emotional control and discretion, ‘passionlessness’ rather than pathos; if presumably sexual, they are never sexualized, and they become mothers through adoption, not reproduction” (“Bolder with Her Lover in the Dark” 61). Not only does Ermine Williams adopt a child rather than become a biological mother (as does Wilkie Collins’s Lavinia Blythe in Hide and Seek [1854]), but the sexual aspect of her marriage is further obfuscated by the fact that she does not spend her wedding night with her husband, who instead abandons her for a fortnight to rush to the side of a dying family member (The Clever Woman 358–59).

Rather than rendering her marriage unsatisfactory, the seemingly sexless nature of Ermine’s relationship with Colin Keith seems to stand as an ideal; Colin’s chivalrous adoration of Ermine has so little to do with lust that a celibate marriage seems a fitting conclusion to their long courtship.⁶ The same could be said, however, for many of the fictional marriages which involve an able-bodied angel in the house: think of Agnes and David’s marriage in David Copperfield (1850). The qualities which make Dora Spenlow,

Little Em'ly, and even Rosa Dartle so sexually attractive (ornamental uselessness, emotional volatility, and smouldering passion, respectively) render them fundamentally unsuited to the role of the domestic angel, yet the woman who embodies the qualities they lack (competence, tranquillity, gentleness) is idealised rather than eroticised. It is no easier to imagine Agnes Wickfield in a sexual light than it is Ermine Williams.

As this comparison makes clear, the sexlessness of the invalid on the couch is really only a heightened version of the fundamental sexlessness of the ordinary angel in the house – and this is where the contradiction at the heart of this twin construction of femininity and disability reveals itself. If the most perfect woman is the angel in the house, then is the angel in the house not also the most desirable woman? And if the angel on the couch is the most perfect angel imaginable, is she not more desirable still? If so, does her passionlessness, her innocence, her passivity – and consequently her vulnerability – run the risk of being eroticised? Perhaps the supposed sexlessness of the invalid serves to heighten her sexual appeal, so that her perpetually recumbent posture becomes sexually suggestive, her bed of pain erotically inviting. This is a contradictory possibility which the domestic fiction I have been discussing keeps at bay, but which Trollope brilliantly exposes in his characterisation of Madeline Neroni, a wolf who dons invalid's clothing the better to hunt the clerical flock.

Madeline's back-story emphatically precludes the possibility that we might take her for an authentically angelic invalid. Before her arrival in Barchester, we are told that she has spent her youth "mak[ing] the most of her surpassing beauty in the saloons of Milan, and among the crowded villas of the Lake of Como," becoming "famous for adventures in which her character was just not lost" (74; vol. 1, ch. 9). Having so compromised herself that she had, as the narrator darkly hints, "probably no alternative," she made a disastrous marriage to the "adventurer" Neroni, returning to her parents' house six months later, "a cripple, and a mother" (74–75; vol. 1, ch. 9). By her own account, she "had fallen" (76; vol. 1, ch. 9), a

phrase which is bound to connect her injury to sexual “fallenness,” coming as it does so soon after the revelation that she bore a child just six months after her marriage. We are offered an alternative account, however, by the narrator, who tells us that “[s]tories were not slow to follow her, averring that she had been cruelly ill-used by Neroni, and that to his violence had she owed her accident” (75; vol. 1, ch. 9). Kate Lawson has considered Madeline’s connection to the spectre of male violence in relation to Kristevan ideas of the “abject” (59), but if we read this connection in light of the paradigms of domestic fiction of the period it becomes, if anything, more troubling still.

The invalids of domestic fiction are frequently injured inadvertently by male relatives who are careless of their safety, whether literally, like Margaret May and Maria Young who are injured when their fathers overturn the carriages they are driving, or financially, like Mrs. Smith whose husband’s improvidence temporarily condemns her to penury. However, domestic violence is a taboo subject in these novels; their plot-lines demand that we read domestic space as a safe haven, and familial relationships as superior to all others. Repeatedly, the presence of the invalid at the heart of the home is used to establish that home’s caring ethos, and to mark it as a refuge from the values of the ruthless marketplace or cruel marriage mart that lie beyond its walls. But by “re-admitting” Madeline to the family home and putting her couch at the centre of family life (76; vol. 1, ch. 9), the Stanhopes also “admit” the dark side of domestic seclusion and marital relationships, a darkness which hovers at the margins of but is never “admitted” to the domestic novel.

The disability which will make Madeline an invalid, then, is the result of experiences that the angelic invalid could never understand or survive. Both in her sexual experience as a fallen woman and her marital experience as a battered wife, Madeline is a kind of anti-angel – one who makes a conscious decision to assume an angel’s costume. For, as the narrator

explains, she is not forced onto a couch, but rather chooses to take up residence upon one. We are told that she has

fatally injured the sinews of her knee; so fatally, that when she stood she lost eight inches of her accustomed height; so fatally, that when she essayed to move, she could only drag herself painfully along, with protruded hip and extended foot in a manner less graceful than that of a hunchback. She had consequently made up her mind, once and for ever, that she would never stand, and never attempt to move herself. (75; vol. 1, ch. 9)

The level of detail provided here demystifies Madeline's impairments and their precise connection to her invalid status, which immediately complicates her relationship to the category "invalid." As Maria Frawley has pointed out, the "absence of specific medical information" is a hallmark of most invalid narratives (4). This is something which Madeline herself goes on to manipulate in the vague but affecting versions of this story she tells her admirers (99; vol. 1, ch. 11; 114; vol. 2, ch. 37), narratives we can now read in the light of precise and detailed factual information which ensures that we, as readers, do not share in other characters' reactions.

Moreover, this description makes clear the disjunction between the unavoidable consequences of Madeline's injury (an inability to walk without limping) and the considered and self-assertive way in which she manages these consequences, which fly in the face of what Frawley calls "the key concepts of submission and resignation" which made the "particular sick role [of invalidism] seem especially suited for – even natural to women." (189) Madeline's decision to take to her invalid couch is the very opposite of "resignation"; instead, it represents a determination to manage the presentation of her disability to her own advantage. Having lost control over her destiny, both in being forced to marry Neroni and then in being irrevocably physically changed by his violence, taking to her couch becomes a

way of seizing it back, as Madeline claims the right to control how she will be viewed by others. Her assumption of an angel's role becomes a way of asserting herself: an utterly unangelic gesture.

Moreover, invalidism does not make Madeline any less vain and flirtatious. She develops none of the unworldliness which the other authors I have discussed assign to invalids as a natural consequence of immobility and pain, and she refuses to accept the seclusion which these experiences are usually shown to entail. As the narrator puts it, "though forced to give up all motion in the world, [Madeline] had no intention whatever of giving up the world itself. . . . She had still frequented the opera at Milan; she had still been seen occasionally in the saloons of the noblesse; she had caused herself to be carried in and out of her carriage" (75–76; vol.1, ch. 9). As a sophisticated reader of social mores, Madeline realises that by going out into the world whilst reclining on her couch, she is able to draw upon the trope of an invalid's vulnerability and saintliness, the better to attract her prey. As the narrator slyly notes, men are always welcome on her sofa: "Madeline could always dispose herself so as to make room for a gentleman, though, as she declared, the crinoline of her lady friends was much too bulky to be so accommodated" (98; vol. 1, ch. 11).

At the Proudies' party which launches her social life in Barchester, Madeline has herself carried to her pre-ordered sofa, and then invites the bishop to sit beside her and hear her "sad story" (98; vol. 1, ch. 11). The tale Madeline spins is a kind of burlesque on the invalid narrative familiar from domestic fiction. Employing the trope of the woman whom disability has purified and ennobled, "just touch[ing] the corner of her eyes with the most lovely of pocket-handkerchiefs," Madeline confides to the bishop that she has been "sorely tried – tried, she thought, beyond the common endurance of humanity; but while her child was left to her, everything was left" (99; vol. 1, ch. 11). The reader, of course, knows Madeline to be an indifferent mother, and anything but impervious to worldly things – before

this very party, we know that she has “sent a servant beforehand to learn whether it was a right or a left hand sofa, for it required that she should dress accordingly, particularly as regarded her bracelets” (91–92; vol. 1, ch. 10) – but the bishop, hearing exactly what he expects to hear from a woman who cannot walk, is completely taken in.

By the time Madeline is telling Squire Thorne “of her mutilated limb, her youth destroyed in its fullest bloom, her beauty robbed of its every charm, her life blighted” (114; vol. 2, ch. 37), we can recognise a pattern. Madeline’s invalid narrative appears to her listeners as the spontaneous overflowing of a suffering spirit, but is actually a calculated performance; as the narrator tells us, Madeline possesses too much “enduring courage” to complain spontaneously, and “alluded to [her sufferings] only to elicit the sympathy and stimulate the admiration of the men with whom she flirted” (175; vol. 1, ch. 19). Her invalid patter cleverly plays on the received idea that, as Martha Stoddard Holmes puts it, “visible disability might constitute a way of being seen without being regarded as ‘obtruding’ oneself, and of communicating without offensive clamor through the silent, modest speech of an impaired body” (*Fictions of Affliction* 114). By referring to her “mutilated limb,” Madeline is able to “obtrude” herself without seeming to do so, convincing her listener that her body is doing the talking for her, when in fact, as we know, she has managed her presentation of it in a very particular way for precisely this purpose. Madeline performs invalidism in order to charm her listeners, not because she cannot help it, but as a strategy to win sympathy and disarm her listeners.

While Trollope’s descriptions of Madeline naturalise the connection between injury and unattractiveness – with the injury to her leg referred to as the “deformity destroying her figure” (76; vol. 1, ch. 9) – they completely denaturalise the connection between disability and vulnerability. For a woman with Madeline’s resources of imagination, “deformity” is shown as something that can be managed in such a way that her sex appeal is heightened,

while its social risks are diminished. Invalidism effectively acts as a guarantor of Madeline's respectability – or at least her harmlessness – in the eyes of Barcastrians, enabling her to appear even to a conservative clergyman like Arabin as fundamentally unthreatening. Mrs. Proudie's conception of her as "an intriguing Italian woman, half wife and half not" (104; vol. 1, ch. 11) cannot compete with the cultural power of the invalid identity she claims; when Mrs. Proudie upbraids Mr. Slope with paying too much attention to "such a painted Jezebel as that," he counters her accusation by protesting, "But she's lame, Mrs Proudie, and cannot move" (106–07; vol. 1, ch. 11). By claiming the privileges of invalidism, Madeline successfully overwrites her identity as a fallen woman; far from "stop[ping] her circulating too much," as Joseph Wiesenfarth suggests (48), Madeline's assumption of invalid identity enables her to behave in ways she otherwise could not, and opens doors that would otherwise be closed to her.

Mrs. Proudie is not mistaken in thinking that Madeline's experience of marriage makes her a dangerous guest in Barchester. Her status as a separated woman frees her to flirt with men, unsupervised by a husband as she is, but prevents her from actually marrying anyone, rendering it impossible for any man to "woo her honestly" (269; vol. 1, ch. 27). Doubly excluded from the marriage plot, both as a married woman and as a disabled woman who is, in the narrator's words, "unfitted to be . . . a useful mate" (270; vol. 1, ch. 27), Madeline's attitude compounds her disruptive influence on the marriage plots of Barchester. Her injurious experience of marriage has left her a cynic on the subject, freely declaring to her siblings that marriage "means tyranny on one side and deceit on the other" and should be undertaken only by those who have "no other way of living," a category in which she is persuaded to include her impecunious and idle brother, Bertie, whose scheme to marry Eleanor Bold for money she half-heartedly endorses (142–43; vol. 1, ch. 15). To expose the financial undergirding of the marriage plot so ruthlessly, and to lay bare the ugliness of the

power dynamics which underpin fundamentally unequal marital relationships, is to strike at the ethical heart of domestic fiction. If we do not believe that marriage is a desirable end for our heroine, if we do not want to see her ensconced in a domestic haven of her own with a husband, then how can we will the marriage plot to its conclusion, and celebrate its fulfilment? Madeline interferes in Eleanor Bold's (re)marriage plot, not only by distracting her admirers, but by introducing a subversive cynicism about the ideology of matrimony and domesticity, and even calling into question Eleanor's qualifications as a heroine. She re-casts Eleanor's feminine modesty and decorum – in wearing mourning for her husband in the approved fashion – as mindless conventionalism, calling her “one of those English nonentities who would tie up her head in a bag for three months every summer, if her mother and grandmother had tied up their heads before her” (141; vol. 1, ch. 15).

Madeline's contempt both for the social practices which bind the Barchester community together, and for the patriarchal power structures which underpin it, is neatly illustrated by the visiting card which she has decorated with a “bright gilt coronet” and marked “La Signora Madeline / Vesey Neroni. / Nata Stanhope” (77; vol. 1, ch. 9). She has concocted this grandiose title by combining her father's first name with her husband's surname; as the narrator indignantly points out, “she had no more right to assume it than would have the daughter of a Mr. Josiah Jones to call herself Mrs. Josiah Smith, on marrying a man of the latter name” (77; vol. 1, ch. 9). By inventing a name to which she has no “right,” and endowing herself with a (fictional) coronet to boot, Madeline makes a mockery of patriarchal and socially-approved naming practices. The delightfully anarchic results of this are illustrated when the Bishop takes “La Signora Madeline Vicinironi” for a foreign dignitary, and is later outraged to find she is no one but “the daughter of one of his own prebendaries!” (90; vol. 1, ch. 10; 100; vol. 1, ch. 11). That it is the vacuously pompous Bishop who is so deceived is bound to reconcile the reader to Madeline's behaviour to a

certain extent, although the narrator's wry remark that "if it could solace a poor cripple to have such on her card, who would begrudge it to her?" (77–78; vol. 1, ch. 9) serves less to excuse Madeline's behaviour than to remind us of how and why she gets away with it.

It would, of course, be misleading to suggest that Madeline's defiance of social convention, or her pronouncements on the subjects of men and marriage, carry any kind of unambiguous authorial endorsement. She is repeatedly shown to be a selfish, vain woman whose cynicism at least partly reflects her own lack of moral seriousness. Her sexual allure is consistently portrayed as devilish and is explicitly contrasted to Eleanor's tamer but also worthier charms, Madeline's "voluptuous Rubens beauty" counterpoised against Eleanor's "sweetness" to the latter's clear advantage: "A sudden half-hour with the Neroni, was like falling into a pit; an evening spent with Eleanor like an unexpected ramble in some quiet fields of asphodel" (145; vol. 1, ch. 16). Madeline's very name, with its echo of "Magdalene," underlines her association with sexual fallenness, and by the time the narrator has likened her to Lucifer (76; vol. 1, ch. 9), a basilisk (76; vol. 1, ch. 9; 145; vol. 1, ch. 15), and a spider catching flies in her web (270, 278; vol. 1, ch. 27), there can be little doubt that we are supposed to understand that Madeline's attitudes and behaviour are unacceptable.

In this context, it is easy to see why some critics have read her disability as a narrative punishment for her brazen enjoyment of her own sexuality (Barickman, MacDonald, and Stark 54–55), or as a symbol for the fundamentally diseased nature of women's sexual desire, as does Cindy LaCom when she claims that Trollope "condemns female sexuality by implying that it is inherently deformed" (194). However, there are two major problems with this reading. The first is that by treating disability as pure symbol, it discounts the possibility that Trollope's commitment to realism might have led him to create characters who are disabled not in order to reveal something about who they are, but simply because they have suffered illness or injury, as do real people in the real world which the novel strives to

reproduce. Of course, this is not the whole story in Madeline's case, but there is a realist dimension to Trollope's treatment of both Madeline's injury and her response to it. When LaCom likens Madeline to Spenser's Duessa, "conceal[ing] a deformed and hideous body beneath glorious robes" (LaCom 195), she fails to account for the fact that as readers we have seen what lies beneath Madeline's "robes," and know the reality to be prosaic: far from suffering some unnamed horror, we know that she has torn the ligaments of one knee. More significantly still, we have seen her arranging her shawl to hide her feet and donning with calculated effect the costume which will enchant her fellow guests. Having seen her constructing herself as exactly the mysteriously deformed siren whom LaCom describes, we know that Madeline is deliberately performing this role. Reading Madeline as the embodiment of misogynist stereotypes obfuscates the fact that Madeline is deliberately written as character who plays with cultural expectations and stereotypes, rather than simply embodying them – implicitly encouraging the reader to ponder how and why these stereotypes work as they do, and why certain spiritual and emotional qualities are attributed to those suffering particular physical impairments.

The second, and related, problem with LaCom's reading of Madeline as embodying Trollope's condemnation of wayward womanhood is that it fails to account for the sympathy and even admiration that Trollope extends to her. He credits her with "much enduring courage" (175; vol. 1, ch. 19), endows her with an endearing honesty – "there was very little that was false in anything that the signora said. . . . Nothing could have been more open than her declarations about herself" (273; vol. 1, ch. 27) – and, perhaps most importantly, he gives her a starring role in the novel's set comic pieces. For most critics, and I would venture to guess for most readers, Madeline is the best advocate for the Grantlyean position, simply because it is impossible not to enjoy the moments when she laughs at Mrs. Proudie, exposes Mr. Slope, and in her finest hour brings Arabin and Eleanor together. Madeline is wicked but

she is consistently likeable, and Trollope structures the novel in such a way that sympathy with Madeline does not mitigate against the general direction of its moral thrust. Although Madeline's pronouncements are subversive, in the merry war of Barchester she fights on the right side, exposing the meanness and hypocrisy of the Proudie-Slope party using methods to which the ostensible heroes and heroines could not possibly stoop, but which further their ends. Both her unscrupulousness and her fundamentally good judgement are essential to the novel's plotting.⁷ Moreover, despite her supposed cynicism, she is touched when faced with Arabin's honesty, deciding "to do a good-natured act for once in her life, and give up Mr. Arabin to the woman whom he loved" (130; vol. 2, ch. 38). In the end, it is her intervention which leads Eleanor to accept Arabin.

This redemptive act of kindness closely recalls Becky Sharp's good deed in bringing together Dobbin and Amelia at the conclusion of Thackeray's Vanity Fair (1847). As James Kincaid has pointed out, Madeline's characterisation and plot role strongly recall Becky Sharp throughout ("Barchester Towers and the Nature of Conservative Comedy" 612), and for all that Trollope himself claimed (many years later) that Vanity Fair teaches us to "hate . . . the craft of Becky Sharp," it would be a stretch to claim that the deliciously ambivalent, endlessly engaging Becky inspires nothing but "hatred" in her readers. Reading Madeline as a sister to Becky Sharp surely prompts us to recognise her attractiveness as much as her moral flaws.

Even at the moment of her one "good-natured act," Madeline is up to her old tricks, "raising herself on her elbow and turning her own face full upon her companion's," and making the affecting reference to her own forlorn state ("What would I not give to be loved in such a way by such a man, that is, if I were an object fit for any man to love!") which, entirely predictably, "soften[s]" Eleanor's heart (205–06; vol. 2, ch. 45). Where LaCom reads this as a genuine expression of self-hatred (LaCom 195–96), I think our familiarity with this

ploy of Madeline's, employed in her every campaign of seduction, encourages us to take an enjoyably sceptical view: sceptical because we suspect that Madeline is once again starring in a melodrama of her own direction, this time playing the sorrowful penitent rather than the innocent angel; enjoyable because her ends are, as they have always been, legitimate within the world of the novel. Just as we can enjoy her seduction of Slope because he deserved to be seduced, so we can enjoy this performance of penitence, even if it is at the expense of sweet Eleanor's credulity, because it will ultimately bring about a happy marriage.

The fact that Madeline ultimately assists the Grantly party to return Eleanor to the twin embrace of matrimony and the High Church, as embodied by Arabin, clearly goes some way towards neutralising her apparent scepticism about some of the cherished values of Barchester. Indeed, Jane Nardin has argued that while Madeline parodies the angel in the house, "represent[ing] the ornamental aspect of the angel figure," Trollope "affirms convention" through her characterisation, demonstrating that "submissive tenderness is the one trait that brings a woman happiness" (42). The idea that even in the moment of parodying domestic values, Trollope actually affirms them, is an appealing one because it chimes so strongly with one of the most influential readings of Trollope which have emerged since his critical reputation was revived. In 1970, James Kincaid offered readers a Trollope who created inescapable moral hegemony not despite but through his admittance and incorporation of apparently hostile elements, arguing that in his apparent tolerance for diversity, Trollope succeeds in co-opting everything to his own ends, so that we are "urged to relax into positions which are finally very aggressive and specialized" ("Barchester Towers and the Nature of Conservative Comedy" 599). In the hands of D. A. Miller, nearly two decades later, this position was developed into a full-blown Foucauldian reading of Trollope as a writer whose moral and social worldview "imposes itself through its willingness to 'tolerate' that which it dominates" (126). The fact that Madeline is allowed to escape

narrative punishment and return to Lake Como, while the wickedness which should threaten Barchester values is put to work on their behalf, is satisfyingly consistent with this reading.

The difficulty with Kincaid and Miller's readings of Barchester Towers is that they are, in themselves, problematically totalising, and involve discounting or co-opting moments of real tension in the text. When Madeline reveals her cynicism about the economic basis of marriage, for example, so soon after speaking of her own experience with "harsh sadness" (140–41; vol. 1, ch. 15), I am not convinced that this moment of painful doubt – should we be willing Eleanor to marry any of her suitors? Is companionate marriage really possible in the present state of society? – is completely erased by the narrator's reassurance, on the very next page, that Eleanor's marriage plot will have a happy ending. Certainly, it is managed and contained by being so quickly followed by the narrator's intervention, but surely the narrator's power to reassure us is also conditioned by coming so soon after Madeline's cynical animadversions on the subject. While it is true that the overarching plot of Barchester Towers can and does contain Madeline, it does not follow that she does not unsettle our reaction to that plot, nor that Trollope must have intended wholly to neutralise her effect upon the reader.

The question still arises, however, as to why Trollope would introduce a recumbent Becky Sharp to the closes of Barchester. Why would Trollope want to unsettle our reliance on the generic tropes he himself draws upon in creating the world of Barchester? Here, I think the gendered associations of contemporary generic categories are of primary importance. As Nicola Diane Thompson has convincingly demonstrated, critics and reviewers in this period read novels as being emphatically gendered, and it was not primarily the sex of the author which determined whether the work was read as "masculine" or "feminine" – although this certainly conditioned the response to the novel's gender identification – but the gendered connotations of the genre in which they worked, with

domestic realist fiction consistently gendered as feminine (89, 95–96). As Thompson explains, at different points in his career, Trollope was read both as “intensely masculine” and as fundamentally feminine, with Barchester Towers praised as a thoroughly masculine novel, while his later work was increasingly read as feminine (66–68). Thompson explores various possible explanations for the fact that the gender identification of Trollope’s work shifted over the course of his career, from the changing standards of the times, to the possibility that he was read as masculine when his work was being praised and as feminine simply to the extent that his work was falling from critical favour (88–89), but she does not consider the ramifications of Trollope’s treatment of the tropes of the domestic novel. If we put Madeline at the front and centre of the picture, it becomes easier to understand the critical response to Barchester Towers as “most masculine” (Meredith 595), despite its primarily domestic settings and its focus on the marriage plot.

Whereas Thackeray’s Vanity Fair takes its anti-heroine from the heart of London society to the very edges (and eventually off the cliff) of respectability, following her from the ball-rooms of London to the casinos of Bohemia, Trollope sets his novel squarely in the English countryside, among decent clergymen. Even his villain, Mr. Slope, as the narrator reminds us, “had never been an immoral man” (136; vol. 1, ch. 15). In its setting, subject-matter and major plot-lines, there is every reason to think of Barchester Towers as a feminine, domestic novel, eminently suitable for a lady-like readership. However, by borrowing from Thackeray in his representation of Madeline, and then going one step further by having her parody one of the best-loved tropes of the domestic novel through her assumption of invalid drag, Trollope sets himself apart from the domestic tradition in which he is working, allowing a Thackerayan element into what we might consider an anti-Thackerayan world. His presentation of Madeline allows him to align himself with a male,

satirical tradition, whilst still working within the domestic genre that was so popular at the time.

Trollope is now so well known as one of the great realists of the nineteenth century that it is easy to forget that when he published Barchester Towers, the novel for which he is now most famous, he was still a relatively unknown writer, struggling to find his feet in the literary marketplace. His first three novels, The Macdermots of Ballycloran (1847), The Kellys and the O'Kellys (1848), and La Vendée (1850), represent experiments in different genres: as James Kincaid has pointed out, “the fact that each of these three novels seeks to exploit such radically different modes – first tragedy, then comedy, then historical romance – suggests that Trollope was searching very hard for his genre. He found it only with the publication of The Warden” (The Novels of Anthony Trollope 70). This novel, which Trollope characterised in his Autobiography (1883) as “My First Success” (55), is in essentials a domestic comedy and – for all its concern with reform – as much a marriage plot novel as a political satire. With Barchester Towers, then, which presents many of the same characters, in the same setting, and develops the marriage plot element further, Trollope was in effect nailing his colours to the mast of domestic comedy. However, it seems reasonable to suppose that if – as his Autobiography so strongly suggests – he wanted above all else to associate himself with Thackeray’s style,⁸ he also needed to establish his difference from the lady novelists who had made these subjects their own.

By the time he came to write his Autobiography, some twenty years later, Trollope was happy to quote Nathaniel Hawthorne’s judgement of his work at some length, clearly proud of his reputation as a “solid” and reliable realist (An Autobiography 93). He even claimed his idol Thackeray for the same tradition, declaring him the greatest of English novelists because “his characters stand out as human beings” (An Autobiography 152) – conveniently forgetting the satirical, picaresque qualities which set Thackeray apart from the

realist tradition in which Trollope's own later work stands. Reading Trollope by his own account, we might think that what he borrowed from Thackeray was psychological realism, in contrast to the sentimental or idealised portraits familiar from the domestic novel. This would, however, be seriously misleading: Martineau's Deerbrook is peopled by extremely complicated, well-rounded characters, as is Yonge's Daisy Chain. What troubles Barchester Towers's connection to the tradition of those novels is not its psychological realism, but its parodying of some of their favourite tropes, through its treatment of Madeline Neroni.

That Trollope was able to use the representation of disability to accomplish this end is a testament to the power and ubiquity of disability in the Victorian novel, something which critics have only recently begun to recognise. The sophistication of Trollope's depiction of Madeline's self-construction as an invalid puts paid to any idea that late twentieth-century scholars were the first to notice the socially constructed element of disabled identity, and pushes us to reconsider the complexity of Victorian paradigms of disabled identity. Moreover, it is only by attending closely to his manipulation of the tropes of disability that we can appreciate Trollope's formal achievement in Barchester Towers. Far from being a straightforward and unreflective realist – a “safe” writer who, in Henry James's famous assessment, “never played with a subject” (James 103) – close attention to Madeline clearly shows us at this point in his career, Trollope was both self-conscious and playful in his negotiation of generic tropes. In fact, the attractions of Madeline's affliction turn out to be as multifarious for the literary critic as they are for the clergymen of Barchester.

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Notes

¹ Concerning Trollope's treatment of Eleanor Bold, and her relation to the literary trope of the lusty widow, Noble observes that "Trollope does not produce stereotypes in Barchester Towers; he overproduces them" (183). He does not pursue this argument in relation to Madeline Neroni, but its implications for her character are suggestive and are, I hope, developed here.

² I am indebted to Colby for her helpful definition of domestic fiction, which she describes, in its narrow sense as simply a literary manner and, in its larger sense, as a whole artistic conception or vision of life. The single most striking feature of the major Victorian novel is its essentially bourgeois orientation. It is anti-romantic, un-aristocratic, home- and family-centered. Its values, its subjects, and its principal characters are drawn from middle-class life. It is domestic by the standard dictionary definition of the word "domestic" – "of or pertaining to a particular country," as this type of novel tends to be local, even provincial; "adapted to living with or near man, tame," as it deals almost exclusively with human relationships within small social communities; "of or pertaining to the home or family," as it draws its subjects mainly from the daily life and work of ordinary people: courtship, marriage, children, earning a living, adjusting to reality, learning to conform to the conventions of established society and to live within it tranquilly, if not always happily. (3–4).

Although clearly many male novelists wrote in this tradition, and plenty of female novelists did not, it was, as Colby argues, strongly associated with the feminine. Colby's definition highlights, I think, how closely Barchester Towers accords with the conventions of this genre in certain respects.

³ The connection between the invalid role Margaret embodies, and the values associated with the genre of domestic realism, is clearly illustrated by Yonge's sequel to The Daisy Chain,

The Trial (1861). The Trial is by no means entirely faithful to the genre of domestic realism; much of the novel is taken up by a sensational plot involving a false conviction for manslaughter, and its characters are taken as far away from provincial bourgeois comfort as the American frontier. But Averil Ward's disablement, and her assumption of Margaret's role as saintly invalid – which sees her sofa become “almost a renewal of the family-centre that once Margaret's was” (Yonge, The Trial 439) – marks the novel's return to the confines of domestic realism. The reader is on safe ground from the moment that Averil's sofa takes its place at the heart of the May's establishment: there are no more sensational twists once the angel is back on her couch.

⁴ Margaret's monitory relationship with Ethel, and the salutary effect of disability upon her character, is closely echoed in the relationship between the wayward heroine Katy and the older, ideally feminine invalid, Cousin Helen, in Coolidge's perennially popular bildungsroman, What Katy Did (1872). Although the Carr children's expectation that Helen will “lie on the sofa perfectly still, and never smile, but just look patient” (Coolidge 94) – in itself a testament to the ubiquity of the image of the passive, saintly invalid – is treated humorously, and proves inaccurate, Helen does live up to her billing as the ideal woman, someone who in Dr. Carr's words “is half an angel already, and loves other people better than herself” (Coolidge 105).

⁵ Examples of such marriage-enabling plot-lines include the false hope of the invalid's recovery, as in Collins's 1854 thriller Hide and Seek, when her death is mistakenly believed to be close at hand, as in Yonge's The Trial, or when the invalid becomes convinced that her duty is best served by marrying, as in Yonge's The Clever Woman of the Family (1865).

⁶ Schaffer has convincingly argued that in Yonge's depiction of Ermine's marriage as an ideal, “love is redefined as caretaking” and “romance as familial rather than erotic” (102, 97). While I absolutely agree that Yonge's idealised representation of Ermine and Colin's

relationship privileges care over desire, I am not convinced that Yonge is able to keep at bay the possibility that Ermine's passivity and immobility are erotically appealing for Colin (and indeed for her other admirers), and thus that an erotics of care might emerge from the novel, rather than (or, even more troublingly, alongside) the safely sexless familial feeling Schaffer identifies.

⁷ Cusick has recently offered a compelling reading of Madeline as an ambivalent avatar for the author himself within the novel, both in her matchmaking and her letter-writing (83–85). She also suggests that our reading of Madeline's character is enriched if we consider her in the light of the literary tradition of female match-makers, suggesting that: "Playing with the conventions of matchmaking through an incongruous character like Signora Neroni – one who both mocks and makes marriages, who represents sexual appeal and sexual violence . . . allows Trollope to crack open the seemingly straightforward trope of the woman-as-matchmaker and explore the narrative possibilities she contains" (Cusick 75). Although Cusick's article is not primarily concerned with disability, her approach chimes with my own, both in reading Madeline in a generic context, and in seeing Barchester Towers as a novel that engages closely with the feminised domestic tradition.

⁸ In his Autobiography, Trollope declares that he "do[es] not hesitate to name Thackeray the first" among English novelists (152); Skilton suggests that in the 1850s, "the literary world and the general reading public seem to have been divided into rival factions" of Dickensians and Thackerayans, and that "[o]n this map of the literary world, Trollope [was] early placed firmly in the neighbourhood of the Thackeray pole – precisely where he would wish to place himself" (8).

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